

2. The time you almost died
4. The night we drove to Albany
5. The day you said you loved me
6. The time we painted your apartment
9. The time we got lost in the Catskills
10. The night you made me dinner
14. The time you saved my life

2. I was at the gym when you lost consciousness in your kitchen. I called you when I left for your apartment, but you didn't pick up. I thought of stopping for take-out on the way, but when the time came, I walked right past the restaurants on the avenue. It took me almost half an hour to get to your place - by the time I saw you there on the floor, you were noticeably pale. I had no idea what happened, but my lifeguard training managed to kick in and I pulled off my sweater, wrapping your head with it as tightly as a could. I said your name more times than I can count. I made sure you were breathing while I called 911. I'd be lying if I said the blood didn't terrify me- a surge of dread welled up from deep in my abdomen on sight. It had a smell, a texture. A residue. Its color as it dried on my hands changed from deep, menacing red to hopeless rust. Once the ambulance arrived, I was shaking inside and out. The trip to the hospital was endless, but it only lasted a moment. You didn't open your eyes once, no matter how hard I squeezed your hand. When we got there, you disappeared. I don't know where they took you, where I went, who I talked to, where I sat. When they finally came to say you were okay and that I could join you in your room, it felt like I hadn't seen you in months. You didn't wake up for longer than I could physically bear. I must have slept, because you woke me from your hospital bed. You said my name once, quietly. I bolted upright and climbed up next to you, not having words but only breaths. I touched your cheek and you smiled at me and I knew you were still there, all of you. I worried that I would hurt you, or pull your IV out, or disturb the tube depositing someone else's blood into your body. I tried my best not to touch all those parts. The parts where your head was bandaged and where the needle faded into your forearm. The parts with the little sticky sensors and the buttons and the monitors. Reaching through the tubes and wires, I held on like they were pulling me away. You drifted in and out of sleep for hours. It wasn't until the next morning that you found your voice again. You had no memory of standing up too quickly, of the blood rushing from your head, of fainting, of slipping to the floor, of catching your head on the counter as you went. The doctors said that was normal, that it was better not to remember. I wanted to forget finding you there. Seeing the blood on the corner of the island counter, almost dry. Your hair was sticky and matted red. They washed your hair after you woke up, once your stitches weren't so fresh. I watched your eyes follow the rust colored water to the floor of the shower and down the drain. I wanted to shoo the nurses away, to usher them out and tell them that I would finish up, I would take care of you instead. I would be more gentle and more careful. I would have told you to lean your head back and close your eyes, so the bloody water could wash away without you having to see it.

10. I looked up from my book to the pulse from my phone. *Do you like artichokes?* You had asked me via text. By the time I had typed out *Maybe?* and hit SEND the train was further

underground and the signal was lost. I knew I wouldn't have one again until we emerged on the bridge. I called you when I could - "Well," you said. "I got them anyway." I got off at your stop and chose one of the three liquor stores at the intersection. I picked out a wine that the store clerk promised would go well with artichokes and buzzed your door. You answered the door and my mouth started watering from the smell of the chicken roasting. I couldn't tell if I was more hungry for dinner or for the taste of your lips. We drank the bottle I brought before the food was ready, and by then I just wanted to spend the evening running my fingers through your hair and rubbing your back. Anything to give you chills, to make you want me. When you set the plate down in front of me, I remembered that I hadn't eaten since breakfast. The food was delicious and I told you a thousand times. I wanted you to know that I wasn't just saying it. You taught me how to eat the artichoke - starting with the outer leaves and spiraling inward to the sweeter fruit. You showed me how to remove the choke in one piece, without making a mess of the spines. The heart, the final piece, was the best thing I had ever eaten (and still is). You made yourself a cappuccino after dinner, and you'd bought a box of green tea just for me. I was flattered that you'd remembered. You set out tea cookies on a saucer, and I think I ate them all. We had our dessert on your little balcony that had just enough room for two chairs and a table. I suggested replacing the bistro chairs with a bench so that I could be closer to you. You stood up and offered me your hand.

6. I came over that morning with fresh bagels and lox cream cheese. Sesame for you and everything for me. We stood for a moment in your new, empty living room side by side, taking in the bare floor before it was inevitably covered in furniture and footsteps. We peeled the plastic off of brand new paint brushes and rollers, and laid out drop cloths and paint tins. You gave me one of your t-shirts and a baseball cap to wear. I climbed the ladder as high up as I could and began working on the corners and the trim. You started with giant Ws sprawling as far as your long arms would reach. After an hour of splatters, spills, and mistakes, we switched. You decided you preferred the detail work, while I had more patience for the bigger spaces. It was late July and you didn't have AC yet, so eventually we stripped off our paint-speckled clothes and showered in the coldest water we could tolerate. I scrubbed light green spots off your ears and you did the same for my nose. We shared the one towel you had unpacked, and we lay down on the living room floor, admiring our work. You pointed out patches that I'd missed, and I noticed places where you'd strayed from a straight line. We ordered a pizza, and you almost forgot to put on clothes before answering the door. You were bright red when you paid the guy, standing there in hastily-thrown-on boxers, and I couldn't stop myself from laughing. We finished painting the next morning, since you refused to unpack until the walls were done. The very first box you opened was marked "IMPORTANT" in bold black letters. It had inside it the various documents and certificates that humans tend to accumulate. But the first thing you removed from the box was a photo of me, framed in dark wood. You grabbed a nail and a hammer and hung the photo, right in the middle of the wall. I crept over to you and leaned into your chest, not even bothering to open my arms. You wrapped me up and held me there, swaying just the slightest bit.

14. We were running on the road at a steady pace, on the way back from our turnaround point. My tendonitis had been acting up, and I slowed down to let a leg cramp run its course. The small road we were on wound through the woods, and the distant sound of cars passing was constant. You could never quite tell when one was getting closer or moving farther away; blue shift vs. red. I had stopped for a break on a bend, where the line of sight was limited. I stood on the edge

of the road, bending over to massage my calf. I was suddenly wrenched from where I stood and thrown into the grass. You had grabbed my arm and pulled with all your strength, it seemed. My shoulder briefly unhinged from its socket, but found its place again as I rolled towards the tree line. The wind was knocked out of me as I unraveled onto my back, and I opened my eyes with just enough time to see the tow truck zoom by, hugging the curve tight. He drove straight over the spot where I had been standing only a moment ago. The driver never even slowed. You knelt above me, your eyebrows knit together with worry. "Are you okay?" You asked once, maybe twice, and I nodded because I hadn't yet caught my breath. A throbbing pain made itself known in my shoulder. "I'm sorry if I hurt you... Did I hurt you?" I shook my head so you would stop looking so worried. You looked me over for injuries and then carefully pulled me up to sitting. The enormity of what had just happened began to wash over me. "I didn't... I didn't see it," I managed, cradling my arm. "I know," you consoled me. "Neither did I... I almost didn't." We didn't have our phones or more than a dollar or two, only the keycard to the hotel where we were staying. So, we walked the rest of the way back, this time as far off the road as we could get. You held my hand, tightly. I flinched with every passing car, a slight sickness rising in my gut. I felt sort of airy, like I had just inhaled the contents of a helium balloon. I sat down on the bed and didn't move or speak for a while. You left the room for a minute and returned with a can of Coke and a straw. You sat next to me and opened the can, setting the straw into it and holding it up to me. I felt hot tears fall from my eyes even though the rest of me wasn't crying. "Once I get over the shock, I'm gonna tell you how much hotter you are now that you've saved my life," I tried. "I'm gonna remember that you said that," you replied. You kissed my cheek and wiped some tears away, though they kept falling for a little while longer.

4. Your little sister went into labor late on a Thursday night, so we loaded your car with snacks and the baby gifts that had been sitting on your kitchen table for a month, wrapped and awaiting the expectant mother. We each took off from work the next day, and found excitement in the spontaneous long weekend that lay ahead. We listened to the late-night radio stations as you drove. There was something about being buckled up next to you with your left hand casually resting on the wheel that felt safe, that felt comfortable. Despite the horrific statistics that I knew all too well, despite the hundreds of variables that we had no control over, despite the million other vehicles buzzing around us, despite the poorly-lit merge ramps and the sharp corners, I felt cozy and safe with you driving. I reached over and laid my hand between your shoulder blades. You gave my knee a squeeze. We placed bets on whether your brother-in-law would faint (you were certain he'd have the stomach, while I was entirely doubtful), and whether your mother could wait to cry until she saw the baby (I said she could, and you said she was probably already crying. A quick call to let them know we were en route confirmed that you were right). When we got to the hospital, your mother was so out of sorts that you had to pull her aside and help her catch her breath. Your dad was trying to appear calm, but I could tell he was bursting with anticipation. Your brother-in-law was sweaty and slightly pale. I got him a cup of herbal tea, and ushered your parents out of the room once your sister started having contractions. You went to give your sister a 'good luck' kiss, but she grabbed your hand and didn't let you go. I looked back at you and flashed a thumbs-up. You returned the gesture and blew a kiss. I held your mom's hand while your dad pretended to watch the game on the waiting room TV. Some hours later, you emerged wearing a green smock and a huge grin. "He's 7 pounds exactly, ten fingers and ten toes." Your parents let out sighs of relief and we all gathered in the room to admire the

baby. Your brother-in-law was smiling vaguely, like he wasn't sure where he was, and he looked even sweatier than before. As your parents closed in around your sister I nudged you and whispered, "so?" and nodded my head in his direction. You stifled a laugh and whispered back, "he didn't even last ten minutes before crumbling to the floor. I really thought he had it in him!" "I *knew* it," I said, and made my way to your sister to give her a hug. After we'd all gotten a chance to hold the little peanut, you steered everyone out before kissing your sister on the head and telling her something that made her laugh. You shook the new dad's hand - he looked even more bewildered now that everyone was leaving. "We'll be at your place setting up," you told them, and closed the door behind you. After putting your parents in a cab, you drove us to your sister's house. I heated up leftovers from the fridge while you made up the guest bedroom. We built a fire and sat by the fireplace; something we didn't have the luxury of doing back in New York City. You told me how excited you were to have a nephew, and all the things you would teach him as he grew up. You told me you'd have him visit the City every summer, and you'd show it to him through your eyes and your footsteps. You'd tell him all the things you wish someone had told you, and you'd teach him about good beer and where to buy loosies, should he want to smoke them. You couldn't wait until he would call you Uncle M, and me, Aunt A. You told me how happy you were for your sister, and how beautiful she looked when she laid eyes on the baby. You even said you were excited to learn how to change a diaper. Seeing you that way was intoxicating. With every good intention you spoke, you grew kinder, sweeter, gentler. In an instant you became more mature, more fatherly. You were too excited to sleep, so we spent the night putting the crib together, and a changing table; the baby came two weeks early, and your sister had assumed he'd be late, like you were, and your father, and your grandfather. I demonstrated diaper changing with a teddy bear and newborn Pampers. At first you said it was like origami, but after some practice, you thought it was more like wrapping a deli sandwich. We got a few hours of sleep after we cleaned up all the cardboard, packing foam, and plastic wrapping from the baby furniture. We got breakfast and arrived at the hospital with an assortment of pancakes, homefries, and bacon. You offered your sister the potatoes in exchange for your nephew, and you held him until he started to cry. You realized he needed a new diaper, and were eager to put your new skills to the test. The sight of you holding her tiny new son made your sister weep.

9. We had been hiking all morning. By the time we got to the base of the fire tower, our summit, the sun was directly overhead. We climbed each rickety stair with the inkling that the structure might collapse under our weight. The wind was fierce at the top, and threatened to take your baseball cap. Once we'd had our fill of the panoramic view, we descended the tower and settled on a relatively flat rock for lunch. As we were finishing the sandwiches we'd made the night before, you pointed out a dense blue cloud to the west. Soon the dark mass was overhead and we knew it was only a matter of time. A light drizzle began as we hastily clambered back down the way we came. It felt so much steeper now. We knew there was iron ore in the rocks; we knew we had to get as low as possible before lightning struck. Our boots began to lose their traction as the rain got heavier. A deep grumbling of thunder nearly made us jump out of our skins - we had never heard thunder so loud and menacing. After a long while of picking our way down the rocks, focused intently on the unstable ground at our feet, I looked up and realized we had wandered off the trail. There were no blue markers on any trees that I could see. It took you a while to accept that we were lost. You tried to retrace our steps but our footprints had washed

away. The rain was coming down in sheets, carving paths in its wake that resembled trails but weren't. My pants were soaked through, and water was starting to drip into my rain coat at the neck. We briefly argued about how to continue (you wanted to go east, where you thought we had parked, and I questioned your sense of direction), until we decided to just keep going *down*. When the storm got so bad that we could only barely see, we quickly decided to stop and wait it out. You thought you could make out a rock overhang nearby. We trudged there, our waterproof boots squelching with each step, filled to the brim. We found the widest, driest part of the overhang and huddled together for warmth. We decided we would keep moving as soon as the weather became more forgiving. We both stared out at the falling rain, willing it to let up. For hours, nothing changed. We figured we were still about halfway up - 2 more hours worth of downhill hiking, and that was in warm, dry daylight. We knew the night was fast approaching. With hardly any supplies except half a bottle of water, a length of rope, a wet lighter, a keychain flashlight, and an open bag of trail mix, I insisted that we stay the night under the overhang. Though you protested at first, trying to convince me that we could find our way down in the dark, you eventually gave in and agreed that staying was the safest option. We shared a few bites of trail mix and a couple sips of water, and arranged my small backpack as a makeshift pillow in the most sheltered spot we could manage. After trying and failing to warm up, we unzipped our wet jackets and pressed our bodies together. We closed our eyes and got as comfortable as we could, but neither of us slept a wink, sitting up against the cold rock. As soon as the sun peeked out over the mountains, we headed down the slope silently and with unspoken urgency. The rain had stopped, but the air was thick and misty. Our brows were knitted in concentration as we slipped and stumbled through the fresh mud. When we finally got to level ground and came to a road, we were almost 5 miles south of where we'd started our ascent 24 hours before. Exhausted, hungry, and frustrated, we trekked down the winding road with our eyes on the horizon, anxiously awaiting a familiar landmark, or better yet, your car. At some point, I tripped, my boots waterlogged and heavy. I scraped my knee right through my jeans, and hot, furious tears seeped unsolicited from my eyes. You poured some water over the scrape, offering me the last drop from the bottle. I accepted, and you gently tied your handkerchief around my knee. You pulled me up, held my hand tightly, and we resumed the very last leg of our journey. "I see it," you finally said, pointing to your silver car in the distance. I broke into a run, dragging you with me, suddenly immune to my blistered feet and smarting knee. You didn't let go of my hand, and we ran together until we reached the small parking area. Your car was alone in the middle of the lot. I threw my backpack to the ground, tore off my raincoat and my soggy shoes. I peeled my wet socks off my wrinkly feet. I threw my arms around you and tried very hard not to cry - we were fine, we were alright - I just couldn't help it. We got into the car, our smelly, wet clothes scattered on the back seat. We drove directly to a drive-thru, both with no pants on, and ordered almost everything on the menu. We went back to our motel to stuff ourselves. We slept with the curtains wide open, letting every ray of sunshine in.

5. It was just a Thursday morning - I'd slept at your place the night before. I'd woken up to you kissing my neck, and behind my ear. At first, I was still dreaming. When I opened my eyes, you were looking at me hungrily. I thought I knew what you wanted. "Wait," you said. "Wait." You just kept on looking, for what, I didn't know. I moved to kiss you, and you pulled away. "What's wrong?" I asked, suddenly nervous. "Nothing's wrong," you said, but I didn't believe you. "Tell me," I urged you. I said it twice before you answered. "Nothing's wrong," you said again. I

stared into your eyes looking for the secret that I knew you were keeping. “What, then?” “I just...” you began. “I just need to tell you...” I didn’t look away. “I need you to know that I love you.” The surprise must have shown on my face. For a moment, you looked as though you wished the words had never fallen from your lips. I pulled you closer, tightened my grip. “I thought you were gonna say something else,” I whispered before kissing you slowly. “You don’t have to say it back,” you said. “But what if I do have to say it? What if I need you to know that I love you, too?” It was only then that a smile crept across your face. You kissed me and I wanted to lay with you forever. But it was only a Thursday, and the world didn’t stop for us, even though we spoke those words in the quietest, earliest hours of morning.